

Beijing's Formidable Strategy in the South China Sea

Beijing is prevailing over its neighbors in the South China Sea. It may also have the solution.

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May 21, 2015

The U.S. rebalance to Asia has yet to alter the desired outcome for U.S. allies and partners in the South China Sea (SCS): Checking Beijing's advances in territorial claims. Instead, despite a few successful maneuvers, most of the strategies adopted by the Philippines and Vietnam have backfired. China has seized every opportunity to advance its claims in response to its neighbors' perceived provocations and operational incompetence. Let us consider some examples of how SCS competitors act, react, and interact in the strategic pursuit of their own self-interests.

First, the Philippine's clumsy operation at the Scarborough Shoal during 2012 gave Beijing an opening to control this strategic reef in the northeast SCS. Manila deployed its largest naval asset, a decommissioned U.S. 1960s-era patrol cutter, to apprehend Chinese fishermen ensconced in the lagoon, pursuing them for alleged poaching. But the entrance proved too small and the water too shallow for the warship. Instead, a small boarding team proceeded inside the lagoon to make the arrest. This provided time and space for Chinese law enforcement vessels to intervene. Additionally, Manila lost on the propaganda front. The employment of a naval vessel conveyed the impression the Philippines had militarized the dispute. This allowed Beijing to score points by charging that an aggressive, bullying Philippine navy had pointed guns at hapless Chinese fishermen who simply sought **refuge** inside the Shoal from a storm. Moreover, China was able to exert retaliatory economic pressure – ranging from tourism to banana trade – imposing a considerable cost on Manila. In the end, to preserve bilateral relations, the Philippines had to re-appoint a retired diplomat as the new ambassador to Beijing. That is, factional infighting had left the Pacific nation without an ambassador to China for more than a year. The ensuing months-long standoff handed Beijing a comprehensive victory over Manila.

Similarly, Vietnam shot itself in the foot in 2012 by enacting a controversial maritime law formalizing its claims over the SCS. The action **angered** Beijing, which immediately responded by announcing – on the very same day – plans for a new Sansha City to administer the two million square kilometers of disputed “blue territories.” Beijing's retaliation also included a military garrison on Paracels' Woody Island, capital of the proposed Sansha, along with improved infrastructure there. It is worth noting that **deliberations on this gigantic city** had taken place over a fifteen-year period before it was announced in 2007; however, Vietnamese **protests** that year forced Beijing to shelve it. Now, Hanoi's new law inadvertently provided cover for Beijing to ratify this contentious project, despite the fact of it being a clear violation of the 2002 Declaration of Conduct in the SCS which China signed with southeast Asian countries.

China thus prevailed against Vietnam in leveraging maritime law assertions to proclaim the new Sansha City, and against the Philippines in expanding access to the Scarborough Shoal. In fact, having lost control of the shoal, Manila decided to challenge Beijing on an international legal front. Manila sued China in the International Tribunal on the Law of the Sea over the legality of the latter's nine-dashed line. Beijing viewed Manila's unilateral lawsuit as provocation by a lesser military and economic power, one attempting to draw China into a legal forum against its will. China responded with **massive land reclamations** at its controlled reefs, aiming at completing construction before a verdict could be rendered. “The reclamation was clearly a response to the arbitration,” **admitted** a Philippine maritime expert. “If ever China had real plans to do this before, clearly the arbitration case accelerated those plans.”

Satellite images in late 2014 **proved the impressive scale and speed** of this extensive island building initiative. Before January 2014, Chinese presence in the Spratlys only comprised outposts made of concrete blockhouses perched atop seven coral atolls. Today the size of these reef-based constructions has grown from a total area of 5 acres to about 2,000



Image Credit: REUTERS/Erik De Castro

acres, a 400-fold increase in acreage, according to a new Pentagon **report**. The **dredger Tianjing** used in manufacturing the islands was jointly designed by China and Germany. It had already been under construction during 2008, and was delivered in 2010. Clearly, Beijing has been adding more implements to its sandbox. This again demonstrates the long game played by Beijing's decision makers in this multi-layered competition.

Facing growing criticisms, Beijing justified its moves by citing not only Manila's unilateral lawsuit but also citing **reclamation precedents** related to Philippine and Vietnamese construction operations on islands under their control. Interestingly, the Center for Strategic and International Studies' Asia Maritime Transparency Initiatives (AMTI) published footage supporting Chinese accusations of Vietnamese land-building efforts. The AMTI satellite images **confirmed** significant land building efforts on two Hanoi-occupied areas in the Spratlys between 2010 and February 2015, with a total of 86,000 m² (20 acres) of land being reclaimed. On both of them, "military facilities" have been developed, one of which is only 11 miles away from Taiwan-controlled Itu Aba/Taiping Island. Obviously, and despite complaints against Beijing's actions, Vietnam's own land reclamation program was at least two years ahead of the Chinese effort.

Although Manila and Hanoi each achieved gains in the scramble, Beijing's relative gains are much more impressive. It has effectively established control of the Scarborough Shoal, and created over 2,000 acres of new land, larger than all the other claimants' territories combined. It's worth noting that the reliability of these reclamations and the structures upon them has yet to be tested by typhoons or earthquakes. Aside from bragging rights over construction, in turn eliciting reef-envy among neighbors, what motivates Beijing in these capital-extensive projects?

Injustices

China seems driven to expand by perceived injustices related to the international settlement of its territories. Beijing vividly recalls how China was humiliated at the two peace conferences at the end of the two world wars. At the end of World War I, the German-held Chinese territory of Shandong peninsula was transferred to Japan at the Paris Peace conference in 1919, protests over which helped lead to the establishment of a radical Chinese Communist Party two years later. Thirty years later, at the San Francisco peace conference of 1951, China was not even seated, despite fighting the Japanese longer than anyone, and suffering the highest casualties and destruction anywhere in Asia. In fact, neither of the Chinese governments across the Taiwan Strait was invited. Western powers established the current East Asian order in China's absence. "It would be totally unfair to ask China to give up its legitimate rights and give in to the unjustifiable demands of certain parties," **declared** Chinese Ambassador Cui Tiankai in a keynote speech at Washington. "Let there be no illusion that anyone could impose on China a unilateral 'status quo.' And let there be no illusion that anyone could repeatedly violate China's sovereignty without consequences." In a word, the land-building effort reflects Beijing's will, resolve, and national capabilities.

None of Beijing's reclaimed lands have been tested by natural elements such as the area's periodic typhoons and rising sea levels; however, unlike nature, the United States has chosen not to remain idle. This reflects its traditional dominance and presence in the South China Sea. Washington, Tokyo, and Manila recently concluded military exercises near the China-controlled Scarborough Shoal. Given the many friction points present, a war with a rising China in the vicinity would be easy to start, but difficult to conclude.

Washington's response to the building frenzy – its customary dance of blaming China – is also unlikely to quiet the competition. "We do not support South China Sea land reclamation efforts by any party," **remarked** a Pentagon official. "However, the pace and scale of China's land reclamation in recent years dwarfs that of any other claimant." Earlier, U.S. President Barack Obama also **censured** China for "using its sheer size and muscle to force countries into subordinate positions." These criticisms leave the impression that Washington opposes China's mass and might for strategic reasons instead of the land building action itself. Perceived as unfair, these reproaches are unlikely to induce Chinese compliance with international norms when other claimants seem to act with impunity. What are the lessons for those actions, reactions and interactions?

To understand the origin of the problem, the U.S. should be aware of its own responsibility in creating this tangled skein. The current SCS scramble can be traced to the San Francisco Peace Treaty (SFPT) of 1951. At that time, Treaty designer John Foster Dulles purposefully left Asian frontier territories without owners. As pointed out by Kimie Hara, author of the ***Cold War Frontiers in the Asia-Pacific***, the Treaty originated most of Asia's territorial mess. Remember, neither of the Chinese governments were allowed to take part these deliberations. The South China Sea disputes are just two in the long list of flare-ups from northeast to southeast Asia, including the Kurile Islands/Northern Territories, a divided North-South Korea, and the Dokdo/Takeshima Islands, as well as the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, Taiwan itself,

the Paracels/Xisha, and the Spratlys/Nansha Islands.

Beyond this war of words and submarine “bulldozers,” the real challenge, however, is to devise an effective, multilateral strategy to alter all claimants’ behavior in the SCS. There seems to be no better policy than Beijing’s long-time official stance of shelving disputes and jointly developing resources (*gezhi zhengyi, gongtong kaifa*), arguably a more feasible and forward-looking approach than military responses. Conceived by Deng Xiaoping in 1978 for the Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute, this approach was applied to the Spratlys by the Chinese government in the 1980s. If adopted, it could freeze the status quo, help manage political conflicts, and achieve economic benefits for all. The dividend of peaceful coexistence? Beijing’s urge for expansion would be contained; the American-sanctioned freedom of navigation would be better guaranteed.

Why should Washington support this? First, with Beijing’s resolve and capability, Washington’s allies and partners are unlikely to prevail in a one-on-one SCS facedown. Shelving disputes would help break the vicious cycle of the past: provocation upon provocation over sovereignty disputes. Second, all the other claimants in the SCS dispute are embracing a hedging strategy of relying on Washington for security and on Beijing for economy. They have joined or expressed enthusiasm to participate in the China-sponsored Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank, exhibiting a willingness to engage China when interests converge. Jointly developing SCS resources would reinforce the convergence.

Third, there are important global issues between Washington and Beijing to coordinate, including climate change and North Korean nuclear proliferation. Fourth, since China sponsors the policy, it would have an incentive to abide by its own initiative. Fifth, China promised that its construction activities are not meant for confrontations with the U.S.; instead, they will be used to “provide public goods for all.” In fact, Chinese Navy commander, Admiral Wu Shengli, welcomed the U.S. Navy to use these facilities for humanitarian and anti-piracy purposes. Sixth, we are at the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II in Asia. U.S. support for China’s initiative provides an opportunity for Washington to ameliorate the problems it created in 1951. Finally, two hot wars in East Asia are two too many. It is time for all claimants to seriously consider a return to this approach of joint development. The United States should serve as an honest broker to bring the stakeholders to a negotiating table.

If such an approach could be materialized, Beijing’s formidable strategy of expanding its holdings – with tougher in-kind responses to perceived provocations – would no longer be an issue.

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